

Rules of the Game

All About Grappling (Part Two)

By Skip Williams



In [Part One](#) of this series, we considered the basics of grappling. This week, we'll consider what you can accomplish when **grappling**. *Please note, the following article was modified on 03/13/2007.*

Your Options When Grappling

As noted in Part One, you're grappling whenever you have a foe in your grasp or whenever you're in a foe's grasp. When you begin your turn involved in a grapple (no matter who started the grapple), you have several options, as noted on pages 155-157 in the *Player's Handbook*. Here's a review, with a few additional comments.

Many of these maneuvers take the place of an **attack** (rather than being **standard actions** or **move actions**). If your **base attack bonus** allows you multiple attacks, you can attempt one of these maneuvers in place of each of your attacks, but you use successively lower attack **bonuses** to resolve any required opposed **grapple checks**.

Many of these maneuvers require you to win an opposed grapple check before you can perform them. If you fail the check, you cannot perform the maneuvers and the **action** (or attack) you used to perform the maneuver is wasted.

Activate a Magic Item: You can activate most kinds of magic items except items with a **spell completion** trigger (such as scrolls). In most cases, activating a magic item is a standard action.

Attack Your Opponent: You can make an attack with an **unarmed strike**, **natural weapon**, or **light weapon** against another character you are grappling. You take a -4 **penalty** on such attacks.

You can't attack with two weapons while grappling, even if both are light weapons. If you have multiple natural weapons, however, you can use all of them while grappling. In many cases, though, you're better off making an opposed grapple check to damage your opponent rather than making an attack with a natural weapon (see the section on damaging your opponent for details).

Cast a Spell: You can attempt to **cast some spells** while grappling, or even while **pinned** (see Part Three). The **spell** you cast while grappling (or pinned) must have a **casting time** of no more than 1 standard action. The spell cannot have a somatic component, and you must have in hand any material components or focuses you might need for the spell. To cast the spell, you also must succeed on a Concentration **check** (DC 20 + spell level) or lose the spell.

The Still Spell metamagic feat can prove useful for casting spell while grappling, provided that using the feat doesn't increase the spell's casting time to more than 1 standard action (as it would for a **bard** or **sorcerer**).

A **spell-like ability** has no verbal, somatic, material, focus, or **XP** components, so you can use one while grappling. To do so, you must succeed on a Concentration check; the DC for the check is exactly the same as it would be if you were casting a spell. [See Rules of the Game](#) for more information on spell-like abilities.

Damage Your Opponent: You can make an opposed grapple check to deal damage to your opponent when grappling. If you win the opposed check, you deal **nonlethal damage** equivalent to an unarmed strike (~~1d3 points for Medium attackers or 1d2 points for Small attackers~~ 2d6 for Colossal attackers, 1d8 Gargantuan, 1d6 Huge, 1d4 Large, 1d3 Medium, 1d2 Small, 1 Tiny or smaller; plus **Strength** modifiers). If you want to deal **lethal damage**, you take a -4 penalty on your grapple check.

Monks (and a few other characters), deal more damage with unarmed strikes than other characters, and the damage is lethal. However, a monk can choose to deal their damage as nonlethal damage when grappling without taking the usual -4 penalty for changing lethal damage to nonlethal damage.

~~If a creature has natural weaponry, it deals lethal natural weapon damage with a successful opposed grapple check (its natural weapons are just like unarmed strikes). A creature with natural weaponry can choose to deal nonlethal damage in a grapple by taking a -4 penalty. Even if a creature has natural weaponry, it doesn't use those natural weapons as part of this action. It must use the "Attack Your Opponent" action (described above) to do so.~~

Draw a Light Weapon: You can draw a light weapon while grappling as a move action. This requires a successful grapple check.

Escape from Grapple: You can escape from an opponent's grasp by winning an opposed grapple check in place of making an attack. You can make an Escape Artist check in place of your grapple check if you so desire, but this requires a standard action. If you choose to make an Escape Artist check, your foe still makes a grapple check to oppose your check.

If more than one opponent is grappling you, your grapple check result (or Escape Artist check result) has to beat all their individual check results to escape. (Opponents don't have to try to hold you if they don't want to.) If you escape, you finish the action by moving into any **space** adjacent to your opponent or opponents. This movement is part of the attack or standard action you used to escape the grapple. The movement provokes **attacks of opportunity** from foes who **threaten** the space you leave, but the movement doesn't count against your **speed** for the current **turn**.

Move: You can move half your speed (bringing all others engaged in the grapple with you) by winning an opposed grapple check. This requires a standard action, and you must beat all the other individual check results to move the grapple. Even if you win the opposed check (or checks) you must be strong enough to drag the combined weights of all the creatures you're moving. Your movement provokes attacks of opportunity from foes that threaten you. Likewise, the creatures you drag along also provoke attacks of opportunity from foes that threaten them when you move them.

If you have pinned your foe and nobody else is involved in the grapple (see Part Four), you get +4 bonus on your grapple check to move the pinned opponent.

Retrieve a Spell Component: By using a **full-round action**, you can produce a spell component from your

pouch while grappling.

Pin Your Opponent: You can hold your opponent immobile for 1 round by winning an opposed grapple check (made in place of an attack). Once you have an opponent pinned, you have a few new options available to you, but there are a few things you can't do (see Part Three).

Break Another's Pin: If you are grappling an opponent who has another character pinned, you can make an opposed grapple check in place of an attack. If you win, you break the hold that the opponent has over the other character. The character is still grappling, but is no longer pinned.

Use Opponent's Weapon: If your opponent is holding a **light weapon**, you can use it to attack him. Make an opposed grapple check (in place of an attack). If you win, make an attack roll with the weapon (doing this doesn't require another action). You have a -4 penalty on the attack roll.

You don't gain possession of the weapon by performing this action; you simply turn the weapon against your foe for one attack.

Other Options when Grappling

The grappling options presented in the *Player's Handbook* cover most things you'd want to do while grappling, but here are a few more (strictly optional) possibilities.

Break Another's Hold: This works just like breaking another's pin, except that you use it against a foe that merely has a hold on another character. If you win the opposed check, you free the character you're helping.

Throw Your Foe to the Ground: This works just like a trip attack except that you don't make an initial **touch attack** (because you're grasping your foe already) and you and your foe make opposed grapple checks to resolve the trip attack. If you win, you and your foe fall **prone** in the space you both share, but you're still grappling. At your option you can take a -4 penalty on the opposed check; if you win you break your foe's hold on you and you throw your foe to the ground in a space adjacent to the space you formerly shared. (You stay on your feet.) Your foe's movement does not provoke attacks of opportunity, nor does it count against her movement for the current turn (or her next turn).

If you lose the opposed check, your foe gets a chance to trip you by making an opposed grapple check, just as described above.

Release Your Hold: Curiously, the *Player's Handbook* says nothing about voluntarily relinquishing your hold on a foe, so here's a rule to cover that. You can release your foe as a **free action**. You are still considered to be grappling, however, unless your foe also decides to release you at same time. If your foe does not want to release you, you can escape by winning an opposed grapple check that you make instead of a melee attack.

When you and your foe release each other, one of you must go to a space adjacent to the space the two of you once shared. The movement provokes attacks of opportunity from foes who threaten the space the character leaves, but the movement doesn't count against the character's speed for the current turn. If you made a successful opposed grapple check to end the grapple, you decide who moves. If you both decide to release each other, make an opposed grapple check and the winner decides who moves.

Retrieve a Stored Item: You can use a full-round action to grab an item you're carrying. The stored item must be fairly accessible -- that is stored in a bandoleer, belt pouch, sleeve, pocket, or other location within easy reach.

What's Next?

That covers the maneuvers you can use when grappling. Next time, we'll look at ins and outs of pinning an opponent and of being pinned.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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